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# **Who Are We Smiling For? Three Contradictions Of The Happiness and Wellbeing Agenda In Community Practice**

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## **Introduction**

If you trust simply your spontaneous sense of wellbeing you will never get free. Freedom hurts (Zizek, in *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, 2012)

This article is a critical intervention into the happiness and wellbeing agenda (HWB hereafter) in community practice (used here as shorthand for community education, learning and development). Although our reflections are influenced by the Scottish context they are not solely informed by it, since the rise of the wellbeing industry and its relationship to neoliberalism is clearly a phenomenon of wider relevance (Davies 2014; Ehrenreich 2009). As co-authors, our respective interests led us to a dialogue pegged around the relationship between the rise of HWB discourse and the notion that critique has somehow 'run out of steam' (Latour, 2004). In what follows, we delineate three contradictions shaping the HWB agenda in order to better understand what is at stake for community workers with an interest in critical pedagogies.

For one author, a critical interest in the HWB agenda was inspired by first hand observations of the rise of therapy culture and 'hobbyism' in adult education. More specifically, it emerged from critical reflection on practice that involved working with families living in oppressive conditions but patronisingly named 'vulnerable'. Imagine activities and interactions fraught with complex emotions where, for the purposes of a funding evaluation, the camera comes out and a worker cheerily requests "smile!" Who for? In such ways, participants' emotional experiences are undermined to satisfy funders. A snapshot of a moment in time, a staged image, tells us nothing about a human experience, or the 'impact' of practice.

For the other author, a critical interest in the HWB agenda emerged from critical reflection on local community responses to climate change and fossil fuel depletion. It has been argued by proponents of the relocalisation movement that tackling these issues requires widespread cultural change in local communities, so that people can learn together on a manageable scale to overcome feelings of helplessness and inertia. This proposition has been combined with an orientation towards positive psychology and therapeutic language (under the wider banner of ‘resilience thinking’). The psychology of addiction has been applied to our ‘addiction’ to fossil fuels. Moreover, the notion of change emerging from struggle has been eschewed in favour of positive psychology in a bid to reach out beyond the ‘usual suspects’ interested in green issues and engage a wider constituency by non-confrontational means (Hopkins, 2011). However, this one-sided model of cultural change is flawed insofar as it marginalises the idea of dissent as intrinsic to the democratic process (no matter what the scale) and misrecognises conflict as something one can simply ‘choose’ to engage in or avoid.

These seemingly distant starting points led us both to reflect more widely on the way in which HWB discourse stretches to various other domains of community practice in Scotland - from the focus on building young people’s psychological resilience on their euphemistic journey towards ‘positive destinations’, to the Asset-Based Community Development approach, whose focus on the cognitive rather than the structural has already been critiqued as a form of neoliberalism, albeit with ‘a community face’ (Emejulu and McLeod, 2014). Whilst we are not claiming some kind of hegemonic status for HWB discourse in community practice, we do claim that it is ubiquitous enough to warrant some form of critical analysis, lest community practitioners become complicit in coaching people into a state of bovine acceptance of the status quo.

We take on this task through an analysis of three contradictions at play. It is important to make clear what we mean by contradictions. We don’t take contradiction to designate a situation where two statements are ‘held to be so totally at odds that both

cannot possibly be true' (Harvey, 2014, p. 1), although this use is perfectly valid. Instead, we use contradiction to designate a situation whereby 'two seemingly opposed forces are simultaneously present within a particular situation, an entity, a process or an event' (ibid.). This is the 'dialectical' concept of contradiction and it is our contention that recognising such contradictions increases our capacity to think through problems in practice and the potential for creative solutions to them.

The first contradiction that we address is between knowledge and action. This contradiction, we argue, is foundational and helps to explain the appeal of the HWB agenda on the Left. The second contradiction is between HWB understood as caught between what critical theorist Habermas calls the 'lifeworld' and the 'systemworld'. The third contradiction is between an approach to community practice based on emphasising the power of positive thinking and one which recognises the necessity of dissent.

### **Contradiction one: Knowledge and action**

Therapeutic discourse is currently ubiquitous in education and across popular culture more generally. This trend has cut across ideological boundaries in recent years. The notion of legitimate anger appears to have been exhausted by some on the Left, replaced with the fashionable and more palatable language of positive psychology and often coupled to the language of vulnerability. We are concerned that community practice with a critical pedagogical purpose has been diluted to the point of non-recognition in much public and third sector provision, whilst the disenfranchising language of vulnerability has become an empty term for anyone at the wrong end of unjust social relations. Organisational pressures to win resources often require that community workers attach this disempowering label to constituencies they aim to 'empower' (Rainbird, 2012).

Who has the power to name and who is named? An acid test should always be whether or not those with whom we work recognise themselves in such terms. Arguably, the mutual recognition of relations of dependence and vulnerability is the starting point for the development of *all* authentic human relationships. However,

‘vulnerability’ should not be used as a cipher that enables practitioners to avoid forms of engagement that address contentious issues under the phony guise of ‘duty of care’. For our purposes here, what is important to recognise is the way in which this language works to justify interventions with a skewed focus on one side of the human emotional experience.

Yet it is important to recognise that many community practitioners and progressive intellectuals have a legitimate interest in the HWB agenda, which is, in part, rooted in a frustration with certain brands of ‘critique’ perceived to have ‘run out of steam’ (Latour, 2004). The argument is summarised nicely by education theorists Fenwick and Edwards (2014, p. 3) who argue that:

[E]stablished practices of social critique [have] become a form of conspiracy theory enacted from both the Left and Right. In addressing these concerns, ‘the practical problem we face ... is to associate the word criticism with a whole set of new positive metaphors, gestures, attitudes, knee-jerk reactions [and] habits of thoughts’ (Latour, 2004a, p. 247) and not simply espouse oppositional and negative criticisms...In other words, good critique needs to be affirmative and experimental and not simply an unveiling of power relations.

This is the first contradiction shaping the HWB agenda. Ideological fetishes are not based on a form of absolute ‘false consciousness’ but are based on the disavowal of ‘inconvenient truths’. Particular social practices are often so ingrained that it is easier to simply change one’s beliefs than confront the knowledge that challenges them. For example, this is one of the major sociological challenges of tackling climate change. It is so often assumed (particularly in humanistic educational discourse) that learning is a positive experience, that critical educators have arguably not done enough to address the consequences of learning when it simply overwhelms and ‘makes you sad’: as science educators Bhagat and Huxham (2012, p. 9) put it, one ‘difficult feature of dealing with climate change education is that increasing one’s knowledge might have the opposite effect [from empowering people] - the more you know, the

worse it gets! So perhaps with such subjects we need to allow space for people to deal with emotions.’ We could, for example, quite easily substitute ‘social justice’ for ‘climate change’ in the above sentence.

However, the issue is when HWB discourse becomes ideological. Specifically, positive psychology evangelists are not wholesale wrong, but offer a partial truth as a complete explanation. Radical adult education has historically embraced anger and passion, and translated it into action. In his study of emotions and social movements, social psychologist Jasper (2011) recognises the complex relationship between our emotional life and critical faculties for generating a sense of political agency and underlines the role that ‘righteous indignation’ plays in struggles for justice. Embracing a dialectical conception of human emotion, Freire (2004, p. 58) states that;

I have the right to be angry and to express that anger, to hold it as my motivation to fight, just as I have the right to love and to express my love for the world, to hold it as my motivation to fight.

Without this recognition of the entire emotional spectrum, HWB discourse is bound to create smiling robots. As Ehrenreich (2009, p. 170) so astutely argues, ‘[t]he real conservatism of positive psychology lies in its attachment to the status quo, with all its inequalities and abuses of power.’ History has taught us that confrontations with power reveal its social organisation. For this reason, dissent is intrinsic to genuine democratic learning. Even as the Left’s focus on HWB emerged from a legitimate concern with the relationship between critical knowledge and action, we cannot simply assume that a coherent critique of the status quo underpins interventions driven by positive pragmatism. And we cannot always assume that ‘doing something’ is pragmatic as opposed to mere pseudo-activity.

### **Contradiction Two: Lifeworld And Systemworld**

The ambivalence of the HWB agenda in community practice is arguably made clearer when understood through the lens of critical theorist Jürgen Habermas’s (1984) distinction between the lifeworld and the systemworld. Roughly speaking, the

systemworld is the state-market nexus, whose authority is underwritten by technocratic expertise. On the other hand, the lifeworld consists of those public and private spheres of everyday life driven by rational deliberation about normative, ethical and aesthetic concerns. For Habermas, the ‘colonisation’ of cultural resources in everyday life was an epoch defining concern. Whilst disagreeing with elements of his theoretical project, we nonetheless argue that this distinction is heuristically useful in this particular context.

One virtue of a Habermasian analysis of the HWB agenda is his recognition that wellbeing is an intersubjective, rather than an individual, phenomenon. Through democratic, mutually consensual and transparent interactions in communities, what norms would result in equal wellbeing for all affected? (Finlayson, 2005). The heart of the contradiction concerns the ways in which these qualities (community, social connection, authentic relationships) are what make the idea of wellbeing so attractive to policy makers in the first place. The language of ‘wellbeing’ and ‘community engagement’ confers a degree of legitimacy to policy initiatives. However, lifeworld legitimacy must be translated into technocratic language in order to be ‘heard’ by systemworld functionaries. The need to ‘capture’ HWB necessitates the seemingly endless proliferation of metrics and indicators. The systemworld’s need to measure HWB in the lifeworld, depresses its authentic production.

Insidiously, the focus shifts to measureable outcomes which are not explicit to the agent who enacts the process of achieving them (Finlayson, 2005). Habermas calls this parasitic process colonisation. As a result of colonisation, the intrinsically risky nature of the educational relationship is compromised and sterilised, and thus so is a genuine interpretation of the commitment to developing ‘learning opportunities’ in dialogue with individuals and communities - a commitment ostensibly endorsed by Scotland’s professional standards body, the Community Learning and Development Standards Council. The systemworld alienates community members from their own wellbeing, as they become clientised. So too, educators become alienated from their labour, converted into tools for achieving policy objectives, without call for critical thought and creativity.

The HWB industry has been critiqued for using contestable measures to make inflated claims that have more to do with policy-based evidence than evidence-based policy (see Frawley, 2015). HWB indicators have become commonplace in policy, the product of progressive think tanks such as the New Economics Foundation, in a well-meaning but naive attempt to measure progress in terms wider than just Gross Domestic Product. The reason we use the word ‘naive’ is because these same metrics are used to assess people’s cognitive and emotional faculties as economic resources precisely in the *service of* Gross Domestic Product (Davies, 2014). HWB is essential for ensuring a reliable workforce. For example, we might highlight the Department of Work and Pensions plan to subject the unemployed to the interventions of mental health professionals at their local Jobcentre (Gayle, 2015). Processing people, controlling their free time through participating in ‘resilience building’ interventions and soft skills training is a form of pacification which ensures that there is little space for educational interventions that might ‘empower’ in ways that actually involve an analysis *of* power. Where policy fails to address social inequality, further colonisation is deemed necessary to manage risk and curtail undesirable behaviour under the guise of wellness. We see this, for example, in community-based behavioural change interventions around parenting and healthy eating in ‘vulnerable’ populations.

All too often, under the pressures of colonisation, superficial ‘positive’ statements or images are prioritised above meaningful human experiences due to *competition* amongst third and public sector organisations struggling to survive. From our admittedly anecdotal observations, funding applications and evaluations can lack authenticity or meaning, as community practitioners scramble to find ways to speak a language they are ill equipped to speak. The routinely requested ‘wellbeing webs’ or 3-point scale evaluations (provided in a range of infantilising smiley faces) for the quantification of a day’s work *do* require the critical attention of community workers. Hall and O’Shea (2015, p. 6, our emphasis) argue that we need to do a better job of addressing the affective dimensions of neoliberal ‘common sense’, and we agree: ‘the requirement to make *competitive choices* at every turn has been paralleled by an upsurge in feelings of insecurity, anxiety and depression’. The open question for



community educators and workers is how we can find space within the HWB agenda to at least address the cause rather than ameliorate the symptoms.

### **Contradiction Three: Engaged Optimism And Dissent**

The last contradiction that we want to address is between engaged optimism and dissent as two starting points for democratic engagement in local communities. The particular phrase ‘engaged optimism’ is borrowed from social movement intellectual Rob Hopkins, whose ideas helped to shape the burgeoning Transition Towns movement, which addresses climate change and fossil fuel depletion through community learning and development processes. The basic idea is that climate change and fossil fuel depletion require positive narratives in order to engage, motivate and mobilise. Extrapolating from this environmental focus, we can argue that so does the pursuit of social justice in a time where it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, to paraphrase theorist Frederick Jamison. The idea is that by borrowing from positive psychology, community building should be more like a ‘party’ than a ‘protest’ – come one, come all! Such thinking is an attempt to overcome a situation where pessimism of the intellect defeats optimism of the will.

On the other hand, we have the notion that ‘taking sides’, ‘listening to dissenting voices’ and ‘cultivating awkwardness’ are essential features of democracy and educational encounters with political intent (Learning for Democracy Working Group, 2008). This view recognises that a measure of ‘us/them thinking’ is healthy and that hegemonic struggle (the ‘war of position’) is an intrinsic part of the political process in pluralist democracies. When education is practised as a form of politics, this is what educator Michael Newman (2006) has called ‘disruptive negotiation’. Disruptive negotiation, *‘is contrasted with ‘win-win negotiation, alternative dispute resolution, and community consultation, all of which make use of collaborative dialogue but are actually concerned with maintaining or reinforcing the status-quo’* (ibid., p. 159). This is a form of engagement though which participants are challenged to address the history of their thinking in a culture of ‘exchange and critique’ - not to abandon conflicting interests but to come to a consensus on how they might be expressed and managed (ibid. p. 161). These different starting points are not dichotomous opposites.

In fact, whilst the former position caricatures the latter, the latter usually sees the former as part of a wider process.

In this context, the third actual contradiction emerges from an excessive focus on HWB, which obscures the generative power of struggling both ‘in and against’. In other words, this focus obscures the ways in which the battle over public ‘common sense’ is an educative encounter involving the appropriation and re-appropriation of ideas and ‘values’, as sides are inevitably taken and frontiers are drawn. Evangelists therefore deny that antagonism and dissent are essential components of the democratic engine. The ironic consequence of HWB discourse in this context is that it denies the very perspective which would allow its proponents to understand the ways in which HWB discourse itself floats between discrepant ideological agendas. Hegemony arguably *is* the intellectual tool that can help community practitioners committed to social justice understand how the HWB agenda has been co-opted by neoliberals.

More insidious still, attempts by community workers (regardless of their focus – sustainability, health and social care, poverty etc.) to shake off uncomfortable associations with more ‘radical’ political practices in order to move beyond engaging the ‘usual suspects’, unwittingly shore up a common sense which helps to legitimate the coercive suppression of protest (lumped under the banner of ‘domestic extremism’ by ‘special’ (read *political*) police units acting as an arm of the state). We have moved a long way from outdated pathological explanations of protest participation (the ‘dissident’ personality type). It would be a shame if community practitioners with good intentions became complicit in re-enforcing them. Ultimately, those working creatively within the HWB agenda are doomed to fail, even with the best of intentions, if they don’t recognise that ‘negativity’ can be a necessary and generative part of education for social change in a range of contexts.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Although our tone has been polemical, our intention, in outlining these contradictions, has been to highlight the ambivalence of the HWB agenda and its function in

community practice, in order to try and make sense of the contemporary landscape. The theme of contradiction carries through into these concluding remarks as we ask ourselves, 'what is the proper role of HWB in community practice?' Little reconciliation follows, as we are happy to retain our differing views rather than come to a phony consensus of opinion. For one author, the HWB agenda itself must be understood as 'up for grabs'. In other words, it can be used productively if it is thought of in terms of the wellbeing of the 'body politic' rather than the 'body individual'. For the other, community education has its own distinctive vocabulary and it is disputable, on the grounds of challenging rather than capitulating to fashion, that we adopt this discourse and ingrain its methods. Let happiness and wellbeing be a by-product of social justice and democracy. Let it be cultivated and not manufactured.

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